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March 20, 1995

A Publisher Extra® Newspaper

The Record from Hackensack, New Jersey • 27

Publication: The Record

Location: Hackensack, New Jersey

Issue Date: Monday, March 20, 1995

Page: 27

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MARCH 20, 1995 WORKING LIFE THE RECORD C-3 DEPRESSION: ON: Employers offer help From Page C-1 taking as much disability leave for depression as for coronary heart disease, almost 40 days. After placing mental-healthcare management under the control of an internal employee-assistance program in 1989, the bank was able to cut lost work time stemming from depression. Treatment costs didn't a decline, however, because more employees were treated, Conti says. Among other innovations, the bank began helping employees gradually return to being absent for depressinitar program, EASE, was started last spring at Merck Co. the pharmaceuticals giant based in Whitehouse Station.

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programs act as a clearinghouse, with counselors meeting with employees to discuss problems and, if necessary, to refer workers to outside professionals. At AlliedSignal, the idea is to give workers ready access to employee-assistance counselors, who often are able to help them resolve problems without sending them to more expensive outside professionals, says Cindy Lackovic, supervisor of medical services. Counselors from Life Works Behavioral Health Systems in Parsippany, which has a contract with AlliedSignal, began offering counseling at the headquarters for four hours a week, beginning in December.

That has increased to 13 hours a week, Lackovic says, because of employee demand. At First Chicago, first-level managers are now required to Let VCR Help You With Your Taxes Now you can have the IRS in the palm of your hand. FREE Guide IRS to Taxes Video Punch in the VCR Code, and Get a Free "IRS Video Guide to Taxes" If you're a VCR owner, you can get tips from the IRS on the 1994 income tax law changes, and what to do about them! Just punch the number listed below into your VCR system, and "The IRS Video Guide To Taxes" will be recorded automatically. This free guide is a joint presentation by the IRS, your local newspaper and Gemstar, the maker of VCR The VCR taping system is built in to most VCRs, or available stand-alone. With VCR you can easily tape your favorite programs and access a world of information.

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Westwood, N.J. 666-3133 MEGASAFE High Security Safes Vaults Electronic Burglary Fire Call for Low Prices 201-440-1131 Visit Our Showroom 460 Rt. 46, So. Hackensack mi. East of Teterboro Airport) take a course called "managing problem employees," which teaches how to spot performance problems that could be related to mental illness and to refer employees for help.

But most managers remain unaware about such illnesses, too often seeing the worker as little more than a problem, says Joe, president of the Depressive and Manic-Depressive Support Group of Bergen County. About 70 people come to the support group's weekly meetings in Paramus, many worried their employers will penalize them for their depression and the effect it can have on their work. Those who have noted their illness on find that it is an automatic disqualifier for jobs, Joe says. "The employers are afraid to employ them, and the people who have the problem are afraid to admit it," says Joe, requesting anonymity. "Depression" is actually a blanket term for a' variety of related disorders from severe major depression and bipolar (manic-depressive) disorder, to chronic but milder forms of depression.

Depression sometimes accompanies physical disorders such as thyroid diseases that affect hormones. Normal grief from a divorce or from the death of a loved one can linger and turn into clinical depression. Current treatment ranges from psychotherapy to medication, depending on the character and severity of the depression. If untreated, the condition can create havoc with an individual's career and an office's productivity. For that reason, makes mental-health services available to workers, says Gene Gaeta, director of the company's employeeassistance program.

Workplace concerns are in- creasingly at the root of employee stress and depression, says Edward Jackson, president of the New Jersey chapter of the Employee Assistance Professionals Association. At Union Carbide's facility in Bound Brook, where Jackson is manager of the employee-assistance program, three of every four employees he refers to outside health-care professionals are suffering from stress. "When people are sitting on their thumbs wondering if the

Chicago, describes a typical case: "An employee has been working in an acceptable way for a period.

Then his performance seems to go into the tank. The individual seems apathetic. He's lost the will to complete assignments. He often then falls into the disciplinary route." Ellen Szalinski was a receptionist at a Chicago real estate company when her depression deepened so badly that she lost her temper one day with a visitor, something she had never done. That got the attention of her supervisor, Szalinski says.

"It's a pretty typical story, because it's undramatic," Szalinski says. Still, by the time she blew up at the customer, Szalinski, who is 5- foot-2, weighed 88 pounds. "I had a constant lump in my throat that I would massage, to make the food go down," she says. "I was so sad over nothing, really." She might have committed suicide, she says, had it not been for the intervention of the firm's CEO, who had suffered from depression himself. Recognizing the symptoms, he suggested treatment.

It worked, says Szalinski, now a spokeswoman for the National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association. Privacy issues can make such referrals a particularly tricky issue for managers, says Libby Sartain, a vice president at Southwest Airlines who manages the company's personnel matters. "Our goal is to get the work performance where it needs to be not to mess in our employees' personal lives," Sartain says. The best corporate mentalhealth plans make help easy to get, says Robin Weiner, who advises companies for the consulting firm Foster Higgins. "It's not the kind of thing you ask the guy sitting next to you 'Hey, I'm feeling suicidal.

Whom should I she says. That's why many employers like Merck offer confidential 800 numbers that workers can call for help. In the managed-care plans that many employers are implementing for 1-health benefits, the next step is having someone interview the caller, usually in person. The last step is finding the right treatment. Even at the most progressive firms, the stigma surrounding mental illness remains a barrier to effective care, experts say.

A poll sponsored by the National Mental Health Association found that 43 percent of Americans view depression as a personal weakness. John Rush, professor of psychiatry at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School in Dallas, says the findings aren't surprising. In his private practice, he's seeing rising numbers of "stealth patients" clier.rs who come to him for therapy on the condition that he keep no records. They're afraid of what their employers might find out and what will happen if they do..

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